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Saudi Scholar Renounces Violence

(Islamweb) Agencies



A Saudi scholar detained this year for urging attacks against the kingdom has apologised for his statements on public television.

Shaikh Ali al-Khudair's public repentance on Monday night came amid a Saudi crackdown on alleged armed dissidents.

Speaking from his prison cell, al-Khudair said he regretted issuing previous fatwas or religious decrees urging Muslims to attack the West.

"I would like to inform my brothers about the mistakes we made in the past and which we worked hard to justify (from a religious viewpoint)," said the elderly Shaikh.

"But there is still time to correct these mistaken ideas in the minds of the youth and all Muslims, God willing."

The Saudi-owned al-Sharq al-Awsat newspaper said Shaikh Nasr al-Fahd, another scholar who was arrested with al-Khudair, would also publicly repent within the next few days.

During the 50-minute interview, al-Khudair swore three times he had not been coerced into recanting.

Crackdown

Since the 12 May triple bombings against residential compounds in Riyadh which left 35 people dead, Saudi authorities have launched a sweeping campaign against groups and scholars perceived as extreme.

Since then, gunfights have broken out in the capital and the holy city of Madina.

And earlier this month, a residential compound in Riyadh, home to mainly Arab expatriates, was attacked, leaving at least 18 civilians dead.

Al-Khudair told viewers the bombing of al-Muhaya compound was sinful and Islam forbade such attacks.

Many observers questioned whether al-Khudair's appearance on state television was forced and part of the crackdown campaign.

Tactic

Jamal Khashoggi, media advisor to Saudi Arabia's ambassador in London, said the scholar's change of mind demonstrated "how fragile this dogma is".

Al-Khudair's statement came just one day after Saudi Interior Minister Prince Nayif said the kingdom would be lenient on those who denounced violence.

But London-based Saudi dissident Saad al-Faqih told Aljazeera.net al-Khudair had been willing to recant in June. The Saudi government at the time felt secure enough not to need his repentance publicised, he said.

"It's a tactic," said al-Faqih, head of the Movement for Islamic Reform. He said the Shaikh had been imprisoned in 1994 and 1995 and was released after making similar statements.

"The regime feels so weak it needs to screen a video from behind bars," he said.

Fragile Stance

But Khashoggi dismissed that view as "nonsense".

"Nobody would have prevented him in June from making these statements. It would have been more effective for him to say these things then," he said.

"Maybe he could have prevented some of the tragic incidents in Saudi," added Khashoggi.

Khashoggi denied al-Khudair had been forced into renouncing his views.

"Their logic is fragile - that's why it falls apart quickly," he said.

Influence

Khashoggi said he hoped al-Khudair's statements would influence others. But al-Faqih said armed groups would look to their own scholars for guidance.

"These fighters regard their action as part of a global strategy," said the London-based dissident. "They no longer rely on the official clergy, nor other clerics who keep changing their minds," said al-Faqih.

He said al-Khudair changed his view on as many as 25 positions in Monday's interview, a move which would probably diminish his credibility.

In late May, al-Khudair and two other scholars, al-Fahd and Ahmad al-Khalidi, were arrested as part of Riyadh's crackdown on suspected extremists.

The three were charged with advocating violence in sermons both in mosques and on the Internet. Their trial has not yet been scheduled.

PHOTO CAPTION

Sheikh al-Khudair condemned the Riyadh bombing.

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